

SARAH N. HARVEY

Death
Benefits



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Summary: Royce is pressed into service as caregiver for his ninety-five-year-old grandfather and gradually comes to appreciate the cantankerous old man.

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One

“I can’t take it anymore.”

My mom is on the phone in the kitchen. I think she is crying. Or else her allergies are acting up again. Either way, she sounds miserable. She blows her nose vigorously as she listens to whoever’s on the other end. I stop halfway up the stairs from the basement. I could easily slip back down to my room or sneak out the basement door, but something in her voice—desperation tinged with anger, muddied by snot—keeps me on the fourth stair from the top. That and the fact that she’s obviously talking about me. Again.

“He’s impossible, Marta,” she says. “Absolutely impossible. Doesn’t have any friends. Sleeps all day. Watches tv all night. Never showers. Refuses to cut his hair. Pushes his dirty dishes under the bed or stuffs

them in drawers with his dirty underwear. I'm at my wits' end."

I want to leap into the kitchen and say, "Hey! It's only two o'clock. I'm up. I've had a shower. I'm dressed. And I never put dirty things—dishes or underwear—in drawers. I leave them on the floor. And when were you in my room anyway?" I have standards. Low ones, but still. She shouldn't be talking shit about me. It's true I haven't cut my hair for three years, but I wash it every couple of days. It's very fine and super straight, just like Mom's. You'd think she'd be a bit more sympathetic. And now she's complaining to Marta, who's probably not surprised to hear that her poor fatherless nephew is turning out so badly.

Marta is my aunt—my mom's half sister. She's at least sixty to my mom's thirty-eight, and she's lived in Australia for years. Mom says she went as far away as she could without sacrificing a country club membership. Aunt Marta comes back to Canada once in a while, but she hasn't visited us since we moved across the country from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, to Victoria, British Columbia. We came here to be closer to my grandfather, who's ninety-five. He was a famous cellist, back in the day, and he never lets anyone forget it. Marta calls him "a monster of self-regard." Mom says he's just understandably self-involved, being so old and all. I don't know anyone else that old, so I don't know whether old age always goes hand in hand with rampaging egotism.

From what I can gather, he's always been that way, so my guess is that it's not an age thing. It's just Mom trying to put the best possible construction on a shitty situation, like she always does.

"I don't know what to do," she says now. "I need to find somewhere for him to go. Soon. Otherwise I'm going to have a breakdown. I mean it, Marta. Cart me away to the bin. Put me in a straitjacket. Give me a lobotomy. I don't care. At least I'd get some rest."

Somewhere for me to go? What's she talking about? I hate it here, but the only place I want to go is back to Lunenberg. I mean, I can't help it that I'm home all the time. I got mono right after Christmas, and by the time I was feeling better, school was about to close for spring break and then Easter. I'd missed so much school that I was able to convince Mom to let me finish the year by correspondence. And yeah, I'm alone a lot. Back home I had a few really good friends, guys I grew up with, but here—no one. Not yet anyway. Mom says it's early days, but she's wrong. I just don't have the energy for a social life. Or the interest. Even before I got mono, I couldn't muster up any desire to go to a movie, say, or a hockey game. Not that anyone asked. So the days slip by. A little schoolwork, a little TV, a little music, a lot of sleep. Some food, preferably microwavable. I don't have meals with my mom. Even when I was little, I hated eating with other people. I hate seeing all that half-chewed crud when they talk or laugh. Nobody has

any manners. My mom used to laugh and call me Little Lord Fauntleroy. Now she sighs and turns away from me as I stomp downstairs with my dinner.

It's not like she's around much anyway. In spring and summer she's usually out the door by eight o'clock at the latest, working in other people's gardens until early afternoon. She comes home, has a shower and eats something before her piano students start arriving at about three. Some nights the Bach-bashing goes on until nine o'clock. Mom snacks in between students. She eats standing up, staring at her reflection in the window above the kitchen sink. If I stood beside her, this is what I would see: one tall, pale, bony person (me); one short, tanned, wiry person (her). Same stringy hair, same brown eyes, same wide mouth. Same great teeth, but you can't see mine because I'm not smiling. Different noses. Mine is a beak. Hers is small and veers slightly to the right when she smiles. Apparently I have the Jenkins nose, whatever that means. On weekends she works in our garden and practices the piano. And now she says she can't take it anymore and she wants to get rid of me. Harsh.

"I know we can't afford anything fancy," Mom is saying. "It just has to be clean." She's silent for a minute, her fingers playing a fugue on the placemat. She always does that when she's anxious. Plays Bach on a phantom piano. Maybe Aunt Marta is suggesting that I be shipped off to a detention center or something. Except I haven't done anything criminal. Yet. Mom says, "Uh-huh.

Uh-huh. Maybe you're right. No, I don't think he's drinking a lot. I do all the shopping and he never asks for wine or anything. Yes, I suppose he could call one of those Dial-a-Bottle places."

Drinking. Right. I'm sixteen. I have no friends. I have no money. The only alcohol in the house is a bottle of Kahlúa that my mom occasionally spikes her after-dinner coffee with. I drank some once and it almost made me puke. Give me a beer any day. How would I get drunk? Even if I wanted to, I just can't be bothered.

"I don't know about drugs. I don't think so." Mom sounds dubious. "I never see any of the signs." As if she would notice if I was stoned. I used to smoke up with my buddies back home—we'd come back to my place all chatty and hungry, and she was so happy that I had friends over that she'd make us brownie sundaes or blueberry pancakes. I have no idea how to score here, and it wouldn't be any fun alone anyway.

Mom is still talking. "The only other thing to do is hire someone to come to the house. Maybe not for the whole day—he sleeps so much—but at least to help out with meals."

What is she talking about? A babysitter? She must be totally losing it. Early-onset Alzheimer's or something. I'd choose a detention center over a babysitter any day. And I don't need help with meals. My microwaving skills are of a very high order.

"And someone has to help him take a shower."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Since when do I need help taking a shower? I bound up the last four stairs and burst into the kitchen. I hit my head on the doorjamb on the way up and have to sit down suddenly until the wave of pain and dizziness passes. I have done this so many times since we've lived here that Mom doesn't even look up. You'd think I'd learn. When I can speak, my voice comes out as a croak. "No way, Mom. No fuckin' way."

"Hang on, Marta. Rolly's just come upstairs," she says calmly. She gives me a look that means *We'll talk later*. "Rolly, you know how I feel about swearing. I'm on the phone right now."

"Don't call me Rolly," I mutter, my teeth gritted. My head is exploding.

She covers the phone with her hand and hisses at me. "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm not going to some juvie prison, and there's no way I'm having a babysitter. If that's the way you're gonna play this, I'm outta here." I get up to go back downstairs, but my mom grabs my arm and hangs on.

"Juvie prison? Who said anything about juvie prison? What have you been up to? Are you in trouble?" She frowns and says into the phone, "Marta, I'll have to call you back."

For a small woman, my mom is really strong. She could probably bench-press me if she felt like it. I pull my arm away, rubbing the spot where she held me. There'll be bruises tomorrow.

“Rolly...Royce. I know it’s been hard on you... moving here...starting at a new school...getting sick...”

“But, Mom—”

“Let me finish, Royce. I wish I could spend more time with you and I wish you’d make some friends, but there’s only so much that I can do.”

“I’ll get a job. I’ll help out more. Just no babysitter.”

“Babysitter?”

“I heard you talking to Marta about sending me away. Or getting a babysitter.”

Mom crosses her arms on the table and rests her head in her arms. Her hair falls around her face and her shoulders start to shake.

“Jeez, Mom. Don’t cry,” I say. “It’s gonna be okay.” It seems like the right thing to say, even though I have no idea if it’s true. My head hurts too much to think straight.

No answer. Just a hiccup and a snort, followed by a sort of neigh. She’s starting to freak me out, so I poke her shoulder and she lifts her face from her arms. There are tears on her cheeks and some snot under her nose, but she isn’t crying; she’s laughing the way she does when I do my fat Elvis impersonation for her.

“What’s so funny?” I ask. I should be glad she’s laughing, but I don’t like being laughed at. Especially when I’m not trying to be funny.

“You,” she replies, between gasps. “What did you think? That I was sick of you?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Oh, honey,” she says. “Never.” She snorts again. “Well, almost never.”

“Then who were you and Marta talking about?”

She stops laughing and wipes her nose on the sleeve of her sweater. “Your grandfather.”

I think about that for a minute. Since we’ve been here, Mom has visited her father every other day and called him every evening. On the weekends, she cooks all his dinners for the following week. She does his laundry and his grocery shopping. She cuts his hair. The few times I’d been to see him, he’d seemed fine to me. Old and cranky, but fine. Mind you, he never actually talks to me. He looks at me, grunts and goes back to whatever he’s watching on tv. He bitches about Mom’s cooking. Or the way she makes his bed. Or the kind of toothpaste she buys him. Now that I think about it, I can see why she might want to put him in a home.

When I went to visit him with Mom about a month ago, the first thing he said to me was, “You look like crap.”

Coming from an ancient geezer in baggy brown cords, a stained beige sweater and slippers with the toes cut out, I thought that was pretty rich.

“Right back atcha, Gramps,” I said.

We glared at each other for a few seconds before he turned to my mother and said, “You need to get married again. The boy needs a man around the house. Someone to take him in hand. You’re obviously not up to the job.”

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Mom and I walked past him and up the stairs to the kitchen, where we put away his groceries in silence. Mom's lips were pressed together in a straight, hard line as she slammed the cans of soup into the cupboard and flung the milk into the fridge. When we were finished, she turned to Arthur, who had followed us into the kitchen, and said, "See you next week."

"Can't you stay for a few minutes?" he whined. "Make me a coffee?"

She shook her head. "Errands to run. Sorry."

"What about you, boy?" he said. "Know how to make coffee?"

"Nope," I said. "No man around to teach me."

We left, with Arthur shouting after us that we were both useless, selfish parasites. I haven't been back.

"So what are you gonna do?" I ask now.

"I'm not sure yet," she says. "If we had a bigger place, maybe he could live with us." She shudders. My head is throbbing and I feel sick to my stomach. Maybe I have a concussion or maybe it's the thought of living with Grandpa.

"I'll just have to find a caregiver, I guess," Mom says. "He'll love that."

"Better find one with a high tolerance for verbal abuse," I say.

"You got that right," Mom replies.

As I turn to go downstairs, she adds, "And I hope you meant what you said about getting a job."



SARAH N. HARVEY is an editor and the author of *Puppies on Board*, *The Lit Report*, *Bull's Eye*, *Plastic*, *The West Is Calling* and *Great Lakes & Rugged Ground*. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia. This book was inspired by her experience caring for her aged father.